Review
Reviewed Work(s): A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan
Review by: Lewis A. Lawson
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☞*A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years.* Edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. 190 pp. $12.95.

After half a century of no-quarter debate over Southern Agrarianism, what else could possibly be said about *I'll Take My Stand* (1930)?

Plenty, as it turns out. *A Band of Prophets,* recording Vanderbilt's fiftieth anniversary celebration of the publication of the Agrarian manifesto, offers two very different, but equally important bodies of judgment. Because of this book, we are better able to see the ideas of the Agrarians both in their time and in ours, both as a reaction and as a prophecy. How times change: these men, once regarded as Confederate diehards, latter-day Champ Fergusons, are now increasingly viewed as Gideonites, who perceived the wickedness of Baal, even as most of the country was clubbing together to raise an altar in his name.

The editors, William C. Havard, professor and chairman of Vanderbilt's Department of Political Science, and Walter Sullivan, Professor of English at that institution, deserve great credit for their choice of participants in the celebration. In these days of such academic specialization that translation-earphones are required at

departmental meetings, these two men obviously understand both each other's discipline and the need to regard the Agrarians from many different points of view. Thus they invited the historian Charles P. Roland, the sociologist John Shelton Reed, and the literary critics George Core, Robert B. Heilman, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Lewis P. Simpson, to contribute essays. On the last day, Gideonites Andrew Lytle, Lyle Lanier, and Robert Penn Warren gathered for a panel, moderated by Cleanth Brooks.

The introduction by Messrs. Havard and Sullivan does just that. We are given a brief review of the making of *I'll Take My Stand.* Then we learn who the celebrants are, why they were chosen, and to what extent their topics were chosen for them. And finally we are given a very useful sense of the ambience of the celebration itself.

Coming first, as history should, Charles Roland's essay is superbly general—and therefore just a little disappointing. The right generalizations for "South" are produced, for which the right examples are adduced. But the world that most of the writers grew up in was not exactly Roland's "South," which is, with apologies to Poe, not of the soul, but of Germany.

The essay by John Shelton Reed—which I smugly entered, to see what kind of linguistic freaks sociology was showing in its tent—is a witty, innovative, productive use of generalization. Reed's point is that the Agrarians were *young* men alienated from their culture, not the Nestorian eminences that they later became for us. Nor were they aiming their cannon only across the Potomac and the Ohio; some of their batteries faced Belle Meade; they were angry not only at the North, but also at the New South, and the Old. The fallen South that they wanted to restore, then, had certain Edenic aspects, as does every revolutionary's millennial dream.

Despite its opposed approach to the Agrarians, Lewis Simpson's essay reaches a conclusion that coincides with Reed's. Simpson sketches a history of modernity, which began when mind split into competing parts, when the spiritual and the secular became radically differentiated. The opposed spheres have not remained in balance, of course: modern history is the effort of secular mind to spiritualize itself, in order to gain total supremacy. Simpson, if I read him correctly, sees the Agrarian impulse as one of the twentieth-century strivings toward a transcendent secular process to replace the departed spirit. If so, the Agrarians were truly alienated, essentially like Voegelin's Modern Gnostics, though the Agrarians scorned that Luciferean host.

Robert Heilman places the Vanderbilt writers in the pastoral tradition. What they sought was an unfragmented world, a world which had integrity, in which men could have the same. They could not be programmatic about it, for such a world would necessarily be unprogrammatic; yet in using words at all, they were reducing the heart's desire to the mind's formulation. As each paper enhanced the others, there must have been an excellent chemistry in the auditorium.

George Core's essay is a very timely reminder, that the Agrarians were something other than the perpetrators of *I'll Take My Stand*. Most of them were teachers, critics, and creators of *belles-lettres:* they were, in the old-fashioned phrase, men of letters. Core considers them as Fugitives and, later, as academics no longer consumed by Agrarianism. In doing so, he broadens our sense of their pastoral intention, which was a life-long struggle to create the whole life.

The last essayist, Louis Rubin, must have felt that by the time he got to the table all the white meat was gone. While none of his predecessors had deliberately picked his topic, yet bit by bit "the Literary Tradition" had been consumed. Nevertheless, by skillful recovery and use of his earlier published ideas, Rubin synthesizes a preparation for his thesis, that *I'll Take My Stand* must be regarded as a symbolic statement. As writers, identified in the several ways by the other speakers, the Agrarians were consciously not writing an expository document, but creating a complex of images that would evoke the conception of the whole man for an audience sufficiently interested and alert. It is this message, available to the sensibility, Rubin argues, that gives the book its lasting appeal.

After such a collection of excellent papers, it might have been feared that the panel of surviving Agrarians would be a drowsy affair, three garrulous old UCV'ers in a Nashville hotel lobby. Would that ever have been wrong: Lanier, Lytle, and Warren never once looked back, but began to prophesy once again, of the need for Barry Commoners, rather than more commoners, of a world hag-ridden by old ideas. It must have occurred to many in the audience: the reason we're still reading *I'll Take My Stand* is that we're just catching up to it.

Lewis A. Lawson, *University of Maryland*